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Huntsville and the Space Program in the 1950s

As the 1940's closed, the Army expanded its rocket program and moved the von Braun team to Huntsville and to World War II arsenal facilities originally used to produce various chemical compounds and

pyrotechnical devices. In Huntsville, the Germans joined a growing cadre of U.S. rocketry specialists. Working under von Braun, the combined team built missiles to counter Soviet Cold War threats. The most



Jet Propulsion Laboratory Director Dr. James Pickering; Dr. James van Allen of the State University of Iowa; and Army Ballistic Missile Agency Technical Director Dr. Wernher von Braun triumphantly display a model of Explorer I, America's first satellite, shortly after the satellite's launch on January 31, 1958. Dr. von Braun's rocket team at the Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama, developed the Juno I launch vehicle, which was a modified Jupiter-C. The Jet Propulsion Laboratory packed and tested the payload, which was radiation detection equipment designed by Dr. van Allen.

famous was officially named “Redstone” on April 8, 1952, in recognition of its development at Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville. The name of the arsenal, in turn, referred to the rock and soil in Huntsville.

In early 1958, world attention focused on the Huntsville rocket team. Earlier in the decade, von Braun had proposed using a Huntsville rocket to launch an American satellite to beat the Russians into space. Instead, Eisenhower favored a Navy program called Vanguard. Then in October 1957, the Soviets launched Sputnik, the first manmade object ever to orbit the Earth. The U.S. countered on December 6 with an effort to launch a Vanguard rocket. Misfortune struck, however, when the rocket exploded in flames on the launch pad. It was, one newspaper headline said, time for the Huntsville team to come through. Von Braun got the go-ahead from Washington, and on January 31, 1958, his Huntsville team launched a modified Jupiter-C rocket from the Florida launch site. It carried Explorer I, the Nation’s first Earth-orbiting satellite, and marked the United States’ initial entry in the space race.

Following Explorer I, American leadership debated over whether the U.S. space program should be administered by a military or civilian agency. The debate resulted in the creation of NASA, a civilian organization, on October 1, 1958. In turn, President Eisenhower later signed an executive order indicating that personnel from the Development Operations Division of the Army Ballistic Missile Agency in Huntsville should transfer to NASA, subject to the approval of Congress. The activation of the Marshall Center on July 1, 1960, meant that the Army would continue the growing task of developing and providing military rockets and missile systems. The Marshall Center would provide launch vehicles for NASA’s civilian exploration of outer space.

Von Braun and his fellow Germans had received American citizenship in the 1950’s and had made Huntsville their home. The team met the challenge of launching America’s first satellite into space. As

the new NASA team in Huntsville entered the 1960’s, they faced even larger challenges, like “Saturn,” a vehicle eventually selected to launch American astronauts to the surface of the Moon.